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Three key takeaways from Innovation Week Birmingham

Over the course of last week, numerous members of Birmingham's technology ecosystem dedicated their time to highlighting Birmingham's innovation capacity in what was dubbed Innovation Week Birmingham.

Industry leaders, from CEOs and attorneys to entrepreneurs and investors, hosted panels, training seminars, a job fair and a startup contest, all with the goal of boosting the Magic City's emerging tech industry. A lot of important discussions took place, but here are the three takeaways from the week:

Birmingham needs a brand

One goal of Innovation Week Birmingham was to raise outside awareness of what's happening within the city's tech community, but Birmingham lacks an identifiable brand on which to build its tech sector.

"I don't think we're going to change our ecosystem until we have a blockbuster success that stays in Birmingham. I look at any other city that has a thriving ecosystem around technology, and there is a billion-dollar plus company they can point to," said Dave Gray, CEO of Daxko.

"What we've been good at is having a series of successes that exit at some stage early on in their life (cycle)."

Experts agree that can't happen overnight. However, certain improvements can be made to increase that possibility.

Execs must change their focus

Birmingham is often perceived as a location possessing big city flair with small town

James Childs

charm, and according to James Childs, an attorney with Bradley Arant Boult Cummings, the wrong part of that has ingratiated itself into the startup scene.

"Birmingham tends to foster a small-company mentality. I think many companies here don't realize or fully understand the amount of work involved to be successful on this certain scale. You shouldn't walk through the Innovation Depot and hear crickets at 5:30 p.m.," he said.

More talent is needed

Steve Ceulemans, vice president of innovation and technology at the Birmingham Business Alliance, says that Birmingham employs 17,000 within the IT sector and is the 39th largest out of more than 800 U.S. communities, placing the metro in the top 5 percent nationally.

Despite those numbers, Birmingham tech companies are struggling to fill a demand for talented workers.

"We need to focus on filling jobs. Some companies located here are thinking about leaving because there's a lack of talent," said TechBirmingham President Jennifer Skjellum.

Recruiting outside talent is possible, but Birmingham needs to reevaluate its corporate culture and do away with some traditional corporate habits to meet its full tech potential.